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Opera and nineteenth-century nation-building : the (re)sounding voice of nationalism

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Chapter Nine

Concordia discors – The Voice of the People The Role of the Chorus Nineteenth-Century Operas

“Music does far more than symbolise and articulate nationalism: music actually participates in the formation of nationalism.” (Philip Bohlman)³⁸⁶

1. Chorus – Human, all too human

In Krzysztof Kieslowski’s movie entitled *Blue* (1993) – the first piece of the *Three Colours Trilogy (Blue/ White/ Red)* – the plot revolves around the endeavour of several characters to finish “The Symphony for the Unification of Europe”. This symphony had been commissioned from France’s greatest composer, who died in a car accident at the beginning of the film. The musical piece in question was supposed to be a huge concerto for twelve orchestras representing the twelve European nations in the Union. The text of the chorus would be sung in Greek and it would be a musical adaptation of the biblical First Epistles to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13: 4-13) also known as St. Paul’s *Hymn to Love*. The main characters seek to complete the musical artwork from different scattered fragments left in manuscript, but they are not even able to reconstruct the central theme. The quest for finding “the voice of Europe” eventually ends when the composer’s wife, Julie, liberated from the self-imposed prison of her grief following the terrible loss of her family, allows the biblical text of the song to “speak with the tongues of angels” in the chorus. The ending suggests that the song of European unification requires transcending the human condition.

However, the context of the film immediately raises a few questions about this harmonious denouement. Is this musical piece European or a tribute to the French nation? The trilogy’s title explicitly refers to the French flag (blue, white and red), the symbol of the French state. Kieslowski intended this work to be a reflection on the French Revolution’s three-words-slogan: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité!* In the film it is explicitly suggested that the song of unification transcends national borders. But what

³⁸⁶ Bohlman, Philip V.: *The Music of European Nationalism. Cultural Identity and Modern History*, Santa Barbara, California-denver, Colorado-Oxford, England: ABC CLIO, 2004, 35.

actually happens is that in spite of the European song's "neutral" Greek language, which refers to the roots of European civilisation, the European concerto is actually French. It was commissioned by a Frenchman, suggesting that the modern bedrock of European culture is in France.

The symphony of European unification is not pure instrumental music, but it culminates in a chorus. A work representing the unity of European nations needs human voice – the voice of the people – the same way as it has already been suggested two centuries earlier in the finale of Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony". But in the nineteenth century – unlike in Kieslowski's movie –, the voice of the people had been conveyed and represented in music by a German composer, who was considered to be the greatest musician of his age. European music stood for a symbol of German culture or vice versa.

Eventually the song of European unification is going to be finished by Julie, a French woman, whose personal story in the film is supposed to be the allegory of liberty. This might immediately recall the central woman figure of Delacroix's painting *Liberté*, which Delacroix intended as an allegory of the *French Revolution*. With all its allusions Kieslowski's movie is firmly grounded in French cultural space, thus in fact the imaginary festivity for the unification of Europe becomes a huge commemoration and celebration of France.

In *Blue* we hear the sound of the voice of the people and we can listen to fragments of the monumental chorus, but we cannot see the actual singers. The whole film, in spite of its articulated public interest – the completion of the European concerto – remains confined in the private sphere of Julie and follows her individual drama. The viewer encounters only a few characters, and no crowd scene is shown all through the film. We can hear the chorus, but we cannot see it. Thus Kieslowski's film, even though it is *par excellence* French and plays with the symbols of the French Revolution, still remains an individual human drama. In this respect it is just the opposite of nineteenth-century operas, where public matters always overrule private life stories.

2. The importance of the chorus

The *singing chorus* was maybe the most important factor in transforming the operas into a virtual *public sphere*. "The chorus was a group of actors who could

represent “the people” as a mass – exactly what the drama of the liberalism required – their voices organised, as only music could organise them, into sustained, unified, and commanding utterance that expressed their identity, independence, unity, and importance.”³⁸⁷ The chorus was opera’s great advantage over the spoken theatre, which could only represent the dramatic conflicts as the struggle of individuals, while the opera could bring crowds on the stage, where they could let their voice heard as an organised mass of people. It was this *concordia discors* embodied in the chorus that actually elevated the opera into one of the most popular artistic genres of the nineteenth century. The voice of “the people” was gradually dominating both the political scene and the operatic stages.

In the eighteenth century the chorus was not a regular part of the opera houses. The only exception was the Paris Opéra (Académie Royale de Musique), but at the other opera houses in Paris – Opéra-comique and Comédie-italienne – there were strict rules about the use of the chorus. Authorities controlled even on the stage the crowd scenes of political nature. They censored the “voice of the people”.³⁸⁸ But beginning with the French Revolution, in Paris and overall in Europe, because of the political struggle scenes presented on the operatic stage, the demand for choruses witnessed and unprecedented grow. While in the eighteenth century social tensions were presented as conflicts between individuals (e.g. the conflict between Figaro and Count Almaviva in Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*), in the nineteenth century it was shown as public conflict between a ruler and his subjects.

Beethoven’s only opera, which today is mostly performed under the name *Fidelio*, is a good example for this ideological and structural change in the history of opera. Its original title was *Leonore* and Beethoven rewrote it several times so that he left to the posterity four overtures and three versions of the same work. But are they the variations of *the same* work or three different operatic conceptions of the same story?

Fidelio(/*Leonore*) is a typical *rescue opera*, which became a very popular genre after the French Revolution. First it was performed in Theater an der Wien in 1805 in Vienna. Ironically the *rescue opera* came just in the right moment. As the datum indicates in that time the Habsburg capital was under French military besiege of the Napoleonic army. Since the bourgeois and aristocrat theatregoers fled the city, at the

³⁸⁷ Parakilas, James: Political Representation and the Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Opera, In. *19th-Century Music*, vol. 16, No. 2, 1992, 181-202, 184.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 185.

opening night of Beethoven's opera mainly French officers filled the audience. The opera was not a failure, but still Beethoven's friends persuaded the composer to revise it. By 1814 when the opera was presented in Kärthnerthor theatre in Vienna, Beethoven wrote two new overtures to it, but he also made substantial changes in the length and story of the opera. One of the most significant alterations concerned the finale of the *Fidelio*. In *Leonore* when Florestan is released from the prison at the end of the opera he sings a love duet with his disguised wife, Leonora, about fidelity, love and freedom. In *Fidelio* in the final liberation scene all the political prisoners are freed and a chorus dominates the stage.

The accent shifts from the private drama to the public problem of political injustice and liberty. Freedom had already been an important aspect of *Leonore* as well, but because of the circumstances of its performance – French officers in the audience – could not have a direct effect. But in 1814, after the Napoleonic wars, by the end of the Congress of Vienna, the final liberation scene of *Fidelio* could provoke strong emotions in the Austrian public and made the opera immediately successful. The chorus scene at the end of the opera was an important rhetorical vehicle contributing to the triumphant reception of *Fidelio*.

After *Fidelio* “the voice of the people” can be heard more often on the European operatic stages. One should just look at the table of contents of a CD containing “famous opera choruses” and will see that almost all the titles are from nineteenth-century operas. Even though eighteenth-century operas also contained memorable ensemble sections (e.g. the famous “Viva la liberta!” from *Don Giovanni*) these did never function as autonomous pieces in music history. While an ensemble is usually “just” the closing section of an act or scene in a pre-nineteenth-century opera, the chorus can be seen as the dramatic and musical culmination of a nineteenth-century opera. The chorus attained the same function and importance as the arias. For example Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1872) actually consists only of vast chorus scenes. The increased use of choruses triggered other alterations as well. The fact that instead of an ensemble of singing characters, masses of people populated the stage in a chorus also required adjustment of the scenery and structure. The ranges of small-scale, rapid episodes were exchanged for huge tableau-like settings, which dominated the operatic stages of the nineteenth century.

3. The types and function of choruses

The history of the nineteenth-century opera begins with the growth of the chorus. Carl Dahlhaus in the *Nineteenth-Century Music*³⁸⁹ differentiates between two types of choruses: the so-called *scene-setting or “picturesque” chorus* and *action chorus*.³⁹⁰ The picturesque chorus according to Dahlhaus functions as musical extension of the stage décor in opera comique, where it fulfils the role of “local colour”. Whereas the action chorus in the serious *grand operas* were crucial to dramaturgy. These action choruses – as Philip Gossett also argues – “developed a musical personality, acquired a dramatic force, became, in short, a people”.³⁹¹

To identify political representation entirely with action choruses would miss the significance of the picturesque chorus, which was actually much more pervasive in the operatic literature of the nineteenth century. Village festivals, folk rituals, weddings and monumental dance scenes appeared on the stage, whose dramatic function was more than only being the markers of geographic settings. The folk scenes and picturesque choruses representing conviviality and folk character were important dramatic tools for example in Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* (1866), in Weber’s *Der Freischütz* (1821), in Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (1890) or Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* (1836). In a time when culture was a matter of politics and politics a recurrent element of culture the slightest allusion to *local colour* immediately had a political function.

The third type of chorus that became prevalent in the nineteenth century was what we might call the *divided chorus*. In order to represent the dramatic conflict between two people or two nations more than one chorus was needed. This sometimes involved more than one soloist protagonists, too. For example the antagonistic nations in *Aida* – the Egyptians and the Ethiopians – or in *Nabucco* – the Jews and the Babylonians – are represented by at least two solo protagonists belonging to opposite camps. Wagner in *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) also makes use of such a divided chorus technique. On the one hand it expresses the different character of the Dutch and of the Norwegian sailors, and on the other hand, the purely female and a purely

³⁸⁹ Dahlhaus, Carl: *Nineteenth-Century Music*, (trans. J. Bradford Robinson), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 124-134.

³⁹⁰ See also Parakilas, 189-190.

³⁹¹ Gossett, Philip: “Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in Risorgimento Opera“, In. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990), 44, 48.

male choruses emphasise the conflict based on gender issues (between Senta, Daland, Erik, and the Dutchman).

The chorus became such an important structural element of the operas in the nineteenth century that even when a solo part was performed the soloist was the representative of a group, he spoke in the name of the people. The rulers are not above the ordinary people any more, either morally or politically. Instead of the eighteenth century absolutist king, the “citizen king“ appears on the stage, who uses his power to serve, not to dominate his people. The conversion from an absolutist perspective on power to a democratic one is represented in Verdi’s *Nabucco* by the figure of King Nebuchadnezzar, who from a tyrant turns into a servant of God and his people.

Public and private issues intermingle and create dramatic conflict, when the protagonist soloist is also the representative of a people. In *Norma* for example the Gaulish high priestess’s amorous liaison with the Roman Consul Pollione causes discontent among her people. In *Aida*, the lovers – the Ethiopian princess, Aida and the Egyptian captain, Radames – have to face the criticism and ostracism of their people. Nevertheless usually love conquers all, it overcomes even national differences. However, both in *Norma* and in *Aida* the couples can find peace and happiness only in death. Love might guide the life of the individuals, but the masses are dominated by the passion of patriotic love and national pride ready to oppress the individual will.

Contrary to Kieslowski’s *Blue*, where the task of the French musician is to compose a musical representation of a unified European spirit, in the nineteenth century artists were supposed to create works that represent the essence of a nation. However, a paradoxical situation arises: in spite of stressing the particularity of the nation, the cultural practices for its realisation were everywhere present in Europe and followed almost the same techniques. As John Neubauer points out, most of the national operas relied on foreign ideas and aesthetic currents.³⁹² In spite of the explicit claim of national authenticity and purity by artists and critics, in reality the European nineteenth-century national canons are hybrid.

Was the task to write national music actually easier than that of creating a musical representation of unified Europe? If one only considers the overwhelming number of theoretical and critical writings pondering about the nature of “national“, the answer

³⁹² Neubauer, John: “Zrinyi, Zriny, Zrinski”, In. *Neohelicon*, Volume 29, Number 1, 2002.

is definitely “no“. The nation was just as diverse and just as much a matter of ideology as every other socio-political reality in human history. Music became a very effective tool to shape the unified voice of the nation. One should think of the popularity of the chorus movements (*Liedertafeln*) in the nineteenth century – especially on German territories –, which re-enacted the huge choruses seen on the operatic stages. But singing already fulfilled a very significant role in the turmoil of the French Revolution³⁹³, as well as later in the European revolutions of 1848 in East-Central Europe. Benedict Anderson argues that modern nation states were characterised by *unisonality*, a term he uses to describe the way in which certain songs (e.g. national anthems) embody the nation when sung together by the people.³⁹⁴ The choruses were the bedrocks of national *unisonality*.

Therefore one might question the validity of Philip Bohlman’s statement: “Nationalism draws attention to the nation-state and supports its function while in the same process drawing attention from the music itself.”³⁹⁵ Actually so much attention was given to music that it contributed to the creation of *unisonality* in the public sphere. Choruses provided the “background music” of a period defined by Rousseau’s ideas about the connectedness of language and music and Herder’s theories devoted to the *Volkslieder* (1778-79) where he argued that the “real voice of the people”³⁹⁶ was audible in their songs. Nationalism cannot be separated from music as something extramusical from an ideal musical essence. Nationalism was the context of these musical pieces – a characteristic of their semiotic network – shaped by the dynamic relation between creation and reception.

4. The singing people

Carl Dahlhaus argues that “the national side of music is to be found less in the music itself than in its political and sociopsychological function”³⁹⁷. He surveys some national operas from Paris, the “capital of the nineteenth century”, to Russia and maintains that national operas could convey the national ideology better than

³⁹³ Mason, Laura: *Singing the French Revolution. Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996.

³⁹⁴ Anderson, Benedict: *Imagines Communities*, New-York & London, Verso, (1983) 1991, 145.

³⁹⁵ Bohlman, 20.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 42.

³⁹⁷ Dahlhaus, Carl: *Nineteen-Century Music*, (Trans. J. Bradford Robinson), Berkely, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, (1989) 1997, 217.

symphonies because of their textual component, the libretti. The libretti were usually based on already well-known dramas – especially tragedies – that were recycled on the operatic stage and thus gained new meaning and function. However, the music was the component that attracted the audience to the theatre and that served as a force of cohesion among the public, who was eager to sing and thus to disseminate these operas. The singing public and melodious operas canonised most effectively *the idea of the nation*.

Philip Bohlman traces back the origins of the nineteenth-century concept of national music to the *epic* and *ballads*. The epic – according to Bohlman – is the story of the proto-nation and the chronicle of a nation’s history. The ballads speak of individuals and events that together constitute a national mosaic. Both types appear in songs that fascinated Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, “because they perceived ways in which the origins of nations paralleled and were articulated by the origins of song”³⁹⁸. Rousseau sees a strong relationship between language and music. In his vision speech created different musical structures and “already by the mid eighteenth century these differences were explicitly national”³⁹⁹. It is in songs and in the cult of singing during the nineteenth-century choral movements (*Liedertafeln*) that the practice of national music establishes its cultural and social position and becomes intertwined with politics. Bohlman distinguishes between *national music* and *nationalist music*. National music is a historical development, while nationalist music is generated by a top-down political will. “Nationalist music serves a nation-state in its competition with other nation-states and in this fundamental way it differs from national music.”⁴⁰⁰

Songs also occupy a central position in Richard Taruskin’s ideas about the roots of nineteenth-century national operas and concept of national music. He emphasizes the role of the romantic *lied* and its characteristics of *Empfindsamkeit* (Personal expressivity) and *Volkstümlichkeit* (folk-like nature). Taruskin claims that in the lied the romantic “I” is bounded musically with the romantic “We”.⁴⁰¹ The “we” was however, pre-eminently represented in *choral music*, whose function and importance Taruskin compares to the “continent-uniting music of the medieval Christian

³⁹⁸ BOHLMAN, 41.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, 119.

⁴⁰¹ Taruskin, Richard: *The Oxford History of Western Music, Vol. 3, The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford-new York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 119-120.

church”⁴⁰². Romanticism made the notions of art and nation sacred. In an age when nation was defined as a cultural community, the huge choral movements and opera choruses can be seen as the re-enactment of national rites. Thus the chorus was perpetuating and strengthening the cultural and social function of both music and nation.

Keeping in mind the previously sketched theories I regard national operas as a hybrid genre of *grand opera* and *Singspiel*. On every level – stage décor, structural organisation of the acts, libretto and music – national operas are a mixture of “high culture” and “low culture”, elite entertainment and popular entertainment. The thirst of the public for operas was insatiable, and the new interest in local culture and history could be very effectively popularised on the operatic stage. Nineteenth century was also the age of the cult of passion. Passionate love – usually with a tragic outcome – and the fate of tragic heroes had already been recurring clichés of the grand operas. In the nineteenth century these were either substituted or combined with patriotic love.

In Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* it is the family and the individual’s thirst for power that requires sacrifice and not the nation or “the people”. Even though Edgardo in the final act laments on his fate at the graves of his ancestors, the past is invoked only as a dramatic tool for accentuating the individual loss and pain in the present. In most of Donizetti’s operas we witness private tragedies and the dramatic fate of individual heroes. A substantial change can be noticed in the subsequent generation Verdi, where the private life of the protagonists are linked to the fate of their people. Private and public concerns are strongly intertwined in Verdi’s *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi*, *Attila*, *Don Carlo* or *Aida*.

There is a turn from the hero as an individual towards the hero as a public figure. The fate of individuals – as presented in Händel’s *Giulio Cesare*, Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* or *Maria Stuarda* – becomes an issue of public interest in most nineteenth century grand operas. This switch is obvious in Bellini’s *Norma*, in most operas by Verdi, but also in Auber’s *La muette de Portici* or *Gustavo III*, in Halévy’s *La Juive* or in Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*. History is not only the life story of the rulers any more, but also the story of the masses ruled by outstanding – positive or

⁴⁰² Ibid. 162.

negative – individuals. Grand opéra thus contributed to national operas with the clichés of dramatic theatrical effects, the interest in passion, heroes and history.

The *Singspiel*, which was primarily a German musical genre, brought on the stage of the “elite” entertainment the world of the folk: folk mythology, folk tales, fairy tales and everyday scenes from village life. It started with Mozart’s *Magic Flute* and continued through Marschner’s *Hans Heiling* and Lortzing’s *Die Jagd* and *Undine* up to Weber’s *Der Freischütz*. The *Singspiel*’s awareness of folk culture later inspired the authors of national operas, too.

Thus national operas on the one hand focused on history, on the figures of well-known heroes – often of mythical grandeur – from local or national history⁴⁰³ and on the dramatic conflict of private problems versus public issues known from grand operas. On the other hand they used the folk-like scenery and mythical world-view of the *Singspiel* tradition as well as the life stories of the “common” village people. In most cases these appear intermingled and create the peculiar world of the national operas.

The voice of the people is represented by a soloist protagonist – the hero representing “the people” – and a chorus – as an independent actor of the story. If national heroes function as *musical statues* in national operas, the chorus has the role of a *musical tableau*. Wagner criticised grand operas for relying on “effects without cause”. However, he dismissed the fact that conveying effects was a core poetical principle of grand operas just as the musical representation of affects was a creative force in eighteenth-century opera seria. The huge tableaux – like in *Boris Godunov* – were not a sign of the composer’s incompetence, but it was rather a poetic vehicle.

Another aspect of the chorus is its connection to liturgical rites. In such operas as *La juive*, *Les Huguenots*, or *Boris Godunov* because of their religious references the choruses are directly linked to church music tradition. Grand operas establish the poetics of secular rites by using the chorus to convey political ideas. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries religious conflicts mixed with social struggles could move crowds, both in reality and on the stage. In the nineteenth century the fight for national freedom and national identity replaced the religious wars and was able to mobilise “the people”.

⁴⁰³ Even though this was a very complicated topic – as John Neubauer pointed out in his article *Zrinyi, Zrinyi, Zrinski* – in many cases, when more nations claimed the same historical personality their own. (See Neubauer, John: “Zrinyi, Zriny, Zrinski”, In. *Neohelicon*, Volume 29, Number 1, 2002.)

Michael P. Steinberg distinguishes between the function of the chorus in such nineteenth-century liturgical or semi-liturgical works as Brahms's *German Requiem* or Verdi's *Requiem* and the choruses in contemporary national operas. He argues that the expression "voice of the people" can be adequately used for the former genre, because these requiems in spite of their national aspects – Brahms wrote a "German" or protestant mass and Verdi wrote a semi-liturgical requiem as a commemoration of the great Italian novelist and national hero, Manzoni – could still preserve the voice of the individual and have not lost from their actuality ever since exactly due to their human and supranational character. On the contrary the choruses of the national operas represent "the voice of the nation".⁴⁰⁴ However, such a sharp distinction between the nineteenth-century ideas of the "voice of the people" and "the voice of the nation" is not plausible. The concept of *the folk*, "the people" and "the nation" were almost used as synonyms. The "amour sacré de la Patrie" – sung in Auber's *La muette de portici* – or the semi-religious psalm-like choruses from *Nabucco* – "Va pensiero" – and *I Lombardi* – "O Signore, dal tetto natio" – were received with a secularised religious enthusiasm and veneration. These were the "sacralised" images of the nation and the rites of the new religion of nationalism that penetrated each and every aspect of the nineteenth century. The voice of the people became the voice of the nation, and the voice of the nation became the voice of the people. "Opera, established as a rite, can now celebrate a communal identity and make musically manifest the destiny of a people."⁴⁰⁵

5. The Voice of the People in *Mihai Bravul*, *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk bán*

My specific concern in the following pages is to focus on the "voice of the people" in Romanian and Hungarian culture as represented in the national operas *Mihai Bravul*, *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk bán*. I aim to study the tangled relationship of competing concepts of the nation and their operatic representations. Which definition of the nation appears on the stage? How is the nation portrayed in the dialectic interaction between the national hero and the singing chorus of "the people"?

⁴⁰⁴ Steinberg, Michael P.: *Listening to Reason. Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, 163-192.

⁴⁰⁵ Conrad, Peter: *A Song of Love & Death. The Meaning of Opera*, Minnesota, Graywolf Press, 1996, 133.

What does national identity mean to these people and how is this revealed in the opera?

5.1. *Mihai Bravul*

Commemoration and the operatic representation of patriotic love are fundamental creative driving forces in the opera *Mihai Bravul*. The chorus section in the opera has the same emphatic role as Mihai's aria, both having the function of instigating courage and patriotism. The dramatic effect of the opera is accentuated by the dialogue structure: Mihai addresses his aria "to the people" and the chorus reassures the leader of their fidelity. However, the chorus in Wachmann's work functions as dramatic ornament. It is an echo of Mihai's thoughts and it functions as a sonoric and dramatic amplifier.

Mihai's aria consists of two parts: a praise song of the country and a prayer to God to protect Romanian people in the war against the heathens (Turks). The appeal to the Christian tradition of the country was a recurring trope in Romanian literature, as well as in other parts of South-Eastern Europe conquered by the Ottomans. It appeared in written sources as well as in folklore. No wonder, that when Mihai sings "death to the tyrants" the chorus joins in and repeats the battle cry.

But who are "the people" in this opera? It is not explicitly mentioned, but from the context is quite obvious that the chorus consists of soldiers. Romanian people are represented as an *Ecclesia Militans*. Their individuality is lost in the Christian and patriotic union. Mihai mentions some concrete names of Wallachian boyars, but their social position does not matter, because they appear only as military leaders and not as the representatives of a higher social class. In fact Mihai himself is depicted as the head of the Romanian army, who protects Christianity and not as a privileged ruler or king. As the subtitle of the opera indicates, "În ajunul bătăliei de la Călugăreni" (In the middle of the battle at Călugăreni), the opera is set on the battlefield of Călugăreni, thus the chorus represents the Romanian army waiting for the Ottoman attack. As indicated by Wachmann, the chorus is supposed to sing with "Allegro con fuoco (stretta)", with passion and in a hurried tempo, which makes the choral closure of the opera a huge cry for battle.

The religious and military aspects of the opera are significant, because they were also important factors in the construction of Romanian identity in the nineteenth

century⁴⁰⁶. The church had a crucial function in Romanian nation-building movements. While in Transylvania it was the Greek Catholic (or Uniate) church that actively contributed to the spreading of national thought through philological and historical works, in Wallachia and Moldova this mission was accomplished by the Orthodox Church. The church had public appeal and could reach out to many people. “The people” could easily identify themselves with the church.

The upheaval of the Greek liberation movements in 1821, had an impact on the whole Balkan region. Political aims were embedded in religious ideology, which claimed that the liberators fight a crusade against the Turkish invaders and protect Christianity. Around 1848 old tropes were revived – of anti-Turkish (anti-invader, occupier) nature – however, by that time these intermingled with anti Fanariot Greek⁴⁰⁷ sentiments and reformist political ambitions.

The church and the army organised the first choral movements in Wallachia: the choir of the monastery at Curtea de Veche, founded in 1845 and the choir of the army Ștabului oștirii (1836-1859). These choral societies had among their members some of Ion Andrei Wachmann’s students, too.⁴⁰⁸ It is also important to notice that in the 1830s, at the beginning of the development of Romanian operatic art, folk ensembles had been used to play music. Later this function was handed over occasionally to the army orchestra and choir, Ștabului oștirii. No wonder that among those few musical works that were discovered from this period one has a direct military reference: it is defined by its title as a military celebration, “tableau with songs” – *Serbarea militară, tablou cu cântece* – (1834), by Matei Millo (1814-1896).⁴⁰⁹

Thus on the one hand the well-established institutions and cultural practices infiltrated nineteenth-century literary and musical works of art, on the other hand, later these created a repertoire for the existing institutions, which opened up increasingly to the public. Music had the imprint of socio-political reality, but later it also had an impact on shaping the socio-political consciousness of the Romanians. Wachmann had a leading role in this expansion of choral music, not only with his compositions – he wrote only either pure vocal music or vocal music accompanied by

⁴⁰⁶ See Chapter Five.

⁴⁰⁷ Wallachia and Moldova were under Fanariot rule for centuries and the governors of the principalities were appointed by the Turkish Porta. (see Chapter Five)

⁴⁰⁸ Constantinescu, Radu: *Wachmann*, București, 1975, 15.

⁴⁰⁹ Cosma, Mihai: *Opera în România privată în context european*, București: Editura Muzicală, 2001, 100.

orchestra – but also as a music teacher (1835-1850) and as a conductor of the national theatre (1850-1858) in Bucharest.

Who are the “tyrants” against whom the chorus exhorts the people and who are “the people” in 1848 in Bucharest? As it has already been mentioned the chorus is a representation of Mihai’s army and the tyrant is the Ottoman rule. However in 1848 by allegorical extensions “the people” were the reformist militants fighting for national rights and the tyrants were identified with the ruling class, which was often pro-Eastern conservative. According to Romanian music historians the boyars belonging to high aristocracy – close to the governor of Wallachia, Gheorghe Bibescu (1804-1873) –, usually attended the performances of Italian opera companies. While theatre plays and operas with a Romanian topic were the entertainment of reformist intelligentsia and middle-class boyars. The reformists of 1848 saw both the foreign rule and governor Bibescu’s circle as tyrannical and oppressive. Bibescu also alienated himself from the reformist boyars by wanting to introduce French as official language in Wallachia. The reformists – even though they were boyars – could identify themselves with “the people” of the chorus invoking national symbols and urging for national freedom. Wachmann sympathised with the Romanian reformists and as a sign of supporting their movement he himself conducted the opera fragment *Mihai Bravul* at the national theatre in Bucharest.

5.2. Hunyadi László

The opera opens with “the voice of the people”, who are just as explicit as in *Mihai Bravul* about refusing the foreign rule and fighting for national rights. “We shall not be faithful hounds / of the breed of Orphan László! (...) No, we shall not surrender the castle!” This is an unambiguous declaration against the King László V and his foreign mercenaries led by Ulrich Czilley, the king’s uncle.⁴¹⁰ But unlike in *Mihai Bravul*, here the chorus is much more than only an echo of the soloist. “The people” are an independent character in the opera: they are against King László and the foreigners, but they also separate themselves from László Hunyadi and his political decisions. “Only László sleeps, / he will not listen to us, / and he believes his foe alone.” Unlike the naïve Hunyadi, “the people” led by Szilágyi, László’s uncle, do

⁴¹⁰ For the plot and detailed analysis of the opera see Chapter Seven.

not trust the king's promise to protect Hungary. Therefore "the people" are the third dramatic force next to King László V and László Hunyadi. The chorus wants to stir up Hunyadi and encourage him to take their side: "The people, who suffered so much, awaits you, /listen how the earth quakes." However, it is not László, but his younger brother, Mátyás – the later king of Hungary, who was indeed regarded as "the king of the people" because of his strict measures against the nobility – who responds to the people. He promises to always fight for them and protect them from foreign rule. It is a very direct allusion to the Mátyás-cult of the nineteenth century, and the only optimistic voice in the whole opera.

When László arrives from the assembly of Futak, where he secured the king of his faithfulness, he does not want to hear about the people's mistrust. As a sign of loyalty towards the king he has already promised to hand over the keys of the castle of Nándorfehérvár, which earlier were given to his father, János Hunyadi, as a symbol of his courage of successfully fighting the Turks. But as at the moment there is no immediate Turkish threat, the king's uncle and advisor, Czillely, convinced the king to take back all the royal properties and to rule the country alone, without the council of the Hungarian nobles. However, this was in straight opposition with the Hungarian nobility's right, as stipulated in the Golden Bull of 1222, to choose their king: hence the discontent of the people.

Who are these "people" actually? They are the voice of the Hungarian nobility, which was however not so strictly divided from other social classes as in Western Europe. They were "the nation"⁴¹¹ in the fifteenth century when the opera's story takes place. In the nineteenth century "the nation" was not defined by ancestry, but by belonging to the same culture, possessing the same cultural heritage. This included next to the nobility the bourgeoisie and the peasantry, too. However, the old nation concept based on the privileges of ancestry did not disappear. The struggle of the two competing nation concepts in *Hunyadi László* also appears in the conflict between Hunyadi László and Gara. The chorus, as the representation of "the people", always supports Hunyadi in this contest, which suggests the supremacy of the more democratic nation concept.

Szilágyi represents the anti-Habsburg voice in the opera. He was the one – as the audience without doubt would have known in 1844 – whose army revenged Hunyadi

⁴¹¹ For more details about the history of the Hungarian nation concept see Chapter One.

László's murder among Transylvanian Saxons, the faithful allies of the Habsburgs. Szilágyi was a highly suitable historical figure to become an anti-Viennese symbol, and of course at the same time, the leading singer of the chorus of "the people".

By contrast, Czillej, who by dominating the weak young king wants to possess all the power in the country, manipulates King László V and turns him against László Hunyadi. By suggesting that Hunyadi plots against his life, Czillej convinces the king that he should strike first and give the order to murder Hunyadi. In the beginning the king does not accept Czillej's plans and he enters the Nándorfehérvár Castle with good intentions. After his short dialogue with Hunyadi, the king declines to take back the keys of the castle and reassures Hunyadi of his trust and benevolence. This act of trust changes the people's attitude towards the king and they all hail: "Long live László, long live the King, / long live the country!"

The only divided chorus section is in the first act, when the Hungarian soldiers are reluctant to admit in the castle the king's men, his mercenaries. This is one of the most dramatic nodes of the opera. "Mercenaries: You rebels.../Hungarians: Be off! /.../You rebels! Then perish! You miserable Hungarians, /guard your fold! /.../Farewell! / Go back to where you came from! We shall chase you /.../ Then perish here, in your castle, / you wicked Hungarian army!"⁴¹²

The king himself is not evil, but only his closest environment, his advisors are wicked: a typical eighteenth-century trope of Hungarian literature. However, later in the opera at the execution scene this myth is going to be debunked: the king betrays Hunyadi, breaks his word given to his mother not to harm László for Czillej's death, and lets László to be led to the gallows and beheaded. What worse, he does not accord royal pardon to Hunyadi, in spite of the fact that according to an unwritten law, if someone does not die after the axe strikes thrice, he has to be pardoned. László also asks for sympathy: "King! I am innocent, / the Lord, knowing it, / took away the executioner's strength / and I am unhurt!" When Gara, the merciless Hungarian noble, commands "Strike!" the king does not interfere. Thus the king, who in the beginning was presented to be only weak and easily manipulated by Czillej, in the end, appears as a thorough villain. The voice of the people demands in vain "Mercy!" in the last chorus section. The dramatic effect of this scene is enhanced by the *preghiera* of

⁴¹² The other exception is the women chorus in second act at Erzsébet Szilágyi's castle. However, from the point of view of dramatic action this women chorus does not have any particular function.

László's mother, Erzsébet Szilágyi, who sings one of the most remarkable arias of the opera.

Gara betrayed his daughter and László by promising Mária's hand to the king in exchange for power. He is thirsty for power and wants to become the regent of Hungary. His arias are also written in *verbunkos* music, as most of László's arias and his duetts with Mária. But, contrary to Hunyadi, there is never a singing chorus that would join Gara. He is alone, without the support from the people. This might suggest that the old nation concept – that of ancestry – represented by Gara lost its dominance and public appeal. However it can be still overwhelmingly devastating. Gara is just as dangerous for Hunyadi – and thus for the people – as the king.

Until this point the chorus supported the king, because the people believe in his honesty. A very impressive chorus section is at the finale of the first act, when Ulrich Czilley has to face the fact that the people discovered his letter of treason and in the heat of a quarrel the people murder him. Not one individual kills Czilley, but a whole group, “the people” stab him several times with their spears. When the king comes into the room and sees his uncle's corpse, he is so frightened that he promises not to avenge Czilley's death on the Hunyadi family. Following his promise to the people, the chorus praises the generosity of the king in *verbunkos* style music. The interesting musico-poetical characteristic of this part is that the king joins the singing chorus, and sings in the same rhythm of *verbunkos* style that is reserved to express the “voice of the Hungarians”. However, the words of the chorus and the king's song are in sharp contrast with each other: while the people celebrate the death of the schemer Czilley and hail the good-hearted king, King László, already plans Hunyadi's punishment and execution: “You base rebel, /death calls for death! /Your deed will be met by/ the executioner's axe on your throat.”

There is always a chorus whenever Hunyadi and the king meet. Hunyadi is surrounded and supported by the people. Even though the antagonistic tone of the people from the beginning of the opera is not to be heard anymore, the dramatic conflict does not languish. It is imbued by the tension that lies between what the people believe on the stage – that the king is merciful – and what the people know in the audience – that the king together with Gara plan László's execution. This discrepancy culminates in the wedding scene, which is interrupted by Gara and his men after the lavish *csárdás* dance passage.

Most of the ideas brought to the stage in the chorus passages were similar to the national demands of the 1840s. Anti-Habsburg feelings had a strong voice in the Hungarian public sphere in that time and in spite of the censorship such allegories as the story of *Hunyadi László* could still be performed on the Hungarian stages. Interestingly enough in the opera appeared an idea that became a political demand only later: the union of Hungary with Transylvania. The chorus sings at the wedding: “Sing a fine song, /merry wedding guests! /Let it shake / the walls of ancient Buda Castle! /Awaken, gale, our murmuring Danube! /Carry down to Transylvania / the appeal of our song! / Today László and Mária /are made one /like this blooming, /brotherly country!” It is only in the twelve points of the revolution in 1848 that the union with Transylvania appears as an explicit political goal. Nevertheless, it has already been circulating in cultural products. By this “Freudian slip of the tongue” of the chorus in *Hunyadi László* we gained an insight in the political unconscious of “the people”, which had been shaped by works of arts instead of top-down political propaganda.

5.3. *Bánk bán*

In *Mihai Bravul* and in *Hunyadi László* the crowd scenes belonged mostly to the *action chorus* category. In *Bánk bán* except the chorus of the discontent noblemen led by Petur bán at the beginning of the opera, most of the crowd scenes have a *scene-setting* function. The only action chorus is set between two lavish scene-setting passages at the beginning of the first act: the opening *verbunkos* after the overture and a *csárdás* dance following the male chorus and Petur’s drinking-song. The beginning of the opera is quite similar to Verdi’s *Rigoletto*: the story opens with a decadent palace scene. People are dancing and drinking, when Lord Petur appears and expresses his discontent with the queen and her courtiers. He sings a convivial-song, which is a mixture of the Duke’s two famous arias, “Questa O Quella” and “La donna e mobile”, from *Rigoletto*.

However, the joyous conviviality is imbued with a tint of tragedy and fatality from the outset. When Petur enters the palace with his cortege of discontented Hungarian noblemen he creates dramatic tension by dividing the crowd on the stage into “us” and “them”. “I cannot restrain my rebellious self.../.../ Look how merry they are! /While Magyars robbed of everything / Are dancing at the end of slave chains

/Foreigners are calling the tune... / Our queen gives them power and money, / And we are outcasts / On the land of our ancestors.” Then very similarly to the technique used by Wachmann in *Mihai Bravul* the chorus repeats the last two lines of the aria, in order to emphasize the main idea of the aria and to enhance its dramatic tension: “And we are outcasts / On the lands of our ancestors.” By repeating the words of the soloist the chorus suggests that “the people” take his side, they completely agree with his woe.

Even though there is no “other” chorus on the stage, still the *divided chorus* impression is created by the tension between Petur’s men and the courtiers dancing in the palace. The chorus of the discontented nobles sets up a third point of division when they are perplexed at hearing that Petur wants to share his plot with Bánk, the viceroy of Hungary, about overthrowing of Queen Gertrude’s rule. In spite of the chorus’s cautious warning Petur is prepared for everything and convinces the people that only a total combat against the Meranian court could restore the ancient rights of the Hungarians.

Just as in the case of *Hunyadi László* “the people” represented in the chorus are Hungarian nobles. Since the Bánk bán topic was widely known and circulating for ages in Hungarian culture – and also in other European literatures – the nineteenth-century audience was familiar with the fact that the Hungarian nobility closed an agreement – which became to be known as the Golden Bull – with King Endre II in 1222, after Queen Gertrude had been murdered. Petur’s drinking song, which he sings in a dialogue form together with the chorus of the discontented nobles, was also well known by the audience. Erkel set to music Mihály Vörösmarty’s (1800-1855) famous poem *Keserű pohár* (Bitter glass). Vörösmarty wrote this poem originally for his drama *Czilley és a Hunyadiak* (Czilley and the Hunyadi Family). The choice is not accidental: Erkel’s librettist, Béni Egressy, both as a leading actor of his time and as a supporter of the reformist intellectuals centred around Vörösmarty, might have known the dramatic works of the poet.

The chorus asks Petur to sing a drinking song: “A drinking song, Petur, a drinking song!” Petur in his reply already refers to the title of Vörösmarty’s poem (Bitter glass) by saying: “Drinking song? You can have it ...but it will be a bitter one.” We might presume that Vörösmarty’s poem had already been circulating among the public as a

song – because both Vörösmarty’s works and drinking songs⁴¹³ in general were very popular – before Erkel’s *Bánk bán* and he might have had embedded it in his opera only with slight modifications. However, today this poem is mostly known from Erkel’s opera. Petur’s song became one of the most well-known Hungarian operatic fragments together with Bánk’s “Hazám, hazám” (My fatherland, my fatherland) aria and the chorus “Meghalt a cselszövő” (The schemer died) from *Hunyadi László*.

As it has earlier been mentioned Petur’s drinking song is quite similar to the Duke’s two famous arias – “Questa o quella” and “La donna e mobile” – from *Rigoletto*. “If you set your man’s soul / Upon a lady, and she / Lightly tears up / Your salvation; / Carrying smiles in her deceiving eyes / And damned tears, / The former raising your desire, / the latter wounding your heart; / Consider it and drink: / The World will end one day, / Vanishing like a bubble; / What will remain is just the air / What will remain is just the air / Drink!” Then the chorus joins in and sings after every stanza as a refrain the last few lines: “Consider it and drink: / The world will end one day / Vanishing like a bubble / What will remain is just the air / What will remain is just the air.” The “bitter” humour of the song takes a more optimistic turn in the second stanza. The attention shifts from the woe over the infidelity of women towards the urge of men to create and achieve something great and to fulfil one’s life mission. “If sorrow and wine / In your mind combine / It will slowly emerge / That life is but an image / Think boldly and great / And put your life upon it: / He who does not despair / Will never be lost. / Consider it and drink: / The world will end one day / But as long as it stands and lives, / it rests not, for better or for worse / It rests not, for better or for worse / Drink, drink!” The chorus repeats the refrain ending it in a lavish orchestral crescendo.

The drinking song actually functions as a miniature encapsulation of the opera’s concern and theme – the same as the convivial song of Konrad in *Hans Heiling* or Senta’s ballad in *The Flying Dutchman* – because it encompasses the main structural

⁴¹³ The drinking song, as a genre has always been present in world literature. Its earliest written forms are preserved in Alkaios’s, Anakreon’s and Horatio’s poems. From the Middle Ages we can mention the collection of songs entitled *Carmina Burana* as a par excellence example of drinking songs. Later, in the Baroque period the revival of Anakreon’s poetry gave a new impetus to this genre. In Romanticism it was also a popular genre because of its folk-like reminiscences. In Hungarian poetry is one of the most important poetic genres throughout the ages. Some famous examples of drinking songs are the following: Balassi Bálint (1554-1594) *Borivóknak való*; Csokonai Vitéz Mihály (1773-1805) *Szeremledal a csikóbőrös kulacshoz; Bacchushoz; Orczy Lőrinc (1718-1789) Szerelem és bor*; Kazinczy Ferenc (1759-1831) *Bor mellett*; Kölcsey Ferenc (1790-1838) *Bordal*; Bajza József (1804-

and ideological elements of the opera. The allusion to the infidelity of the women on the one hand refers to Queen Gertrude, on the other hand to Melinda, Bánk's wife, who in absence of her husband is pursued by the queen's brother, Otto. The other allusion to the "restlessness" of the world refers to the fervour of the rebels, who plot against the queen. The call for resolution reflects Petur's and the discontented nobles' state of mind, and forecasts a revolutionary deed, which however, in the opera is going to be carried out by Bánk and not by Petur when he stabs the queen.

The man-women opposition is carried over in the next section, when the predominantly women chorus sings a praising song for the queen. "Tears of glittering joy appear in our eyes when we see our queen; / Beautiful ladies, gallant gentlemen, / Let's sing the praise of the crown!" Queen Gertrude becomes a symbol of the feminine character of the "foreigners", which is contrasted with the masculinity of the Hungarians. Gertrude and Petur have the function of a synecdoche – or metonymy – in the poetical structure of the opera. The courtiers' chorus and the pure men chorus represent and amplify the voice of the two parties. The only exception is Melinda, Bánk's wife, whose name the Hungarian rebels use as a "password", and whose fate becomes the symbol of the country. Queen Gertrude violates the nation's rights, similarly to Otto, who violates the sanctity of marriage by raping and disgracing Melinda. In the dialogue between Petur and Bánk the female-male opposition perpetuates and gains symbolic proportions, when Petur asserts: "Our manly necks (i.e. Hungarian nation) will no longer / Bend to Gertrude's will... / Her ugly sin cries to heaven...". A divided chorus section after Bánk and Petur's dialogue reinforces the dramatic tension between Gertrude and Petur, when the women chorus hails the queen "Our queen of Hungary! Long live!" and Petur's discontented men enthusiastically repeat Petur's last words about overthrowing the queen: "We will do it!".

There are two moments when the two choruses merge in a musical *concordia discors*. The first is in the first act when the courtiers chorus and the discontented nobles chorus both sing "Long live!". But while the courtiers mean "Long live the queen!" the discontented nobles reply to Petur's cry: "The Magyar freedom! / Long live!". A *csárdás* dance follows this scene, which is far from being convivial. Instead it is a kind of dance macabre also suggested by the exclamation of the dancers: "Three dances before death comes!" The other moment when the two divided choruses meet

1858) *Borének*; Vörösmarty Mihály (1800-1855) *Fóti dal*; *Keserű pohár*; Petőfi Sándor (1823-1849)

is in the finale, when the two choruses sing in a *unisono* the very last words of the opera: “Great is the power of God! / Let the dead rest for ever, oh God! / And receive the soul of the deceased!” It might seem as reconciliation, however, the courtiers’ chorus mourns the queen and the chorus of the discontented Hungarians mourns Melinda, the symbol of the country.

The patriotism of *Hunyadi László* turns into nationalism in *Bánk bán*. The presence of Tibor, a peasant, and his story about the poverty of his family works as a catalyst for changing Bánk’s attitude towards Gertrude. He is ready to join Petur in his plot to overthrow the queen. It is also the symbolic moment of transfer from the old nation concept (represented mostly by Petur and the discontented) towards the new nation concept according to which “the folk” is part of the nation.

In József Katona’s drama *Bánk bán* (1819) – on which Egressy based his libretto – the peasant Tibor had already been presented as a member of the nation. This play had already been regarded in the 1840s as “the national drama”. It was very popular among the Hungarian public, and one of the favourite plays of the theatre companies touring the country. Katona’s play had a significant role in shaping and spreading the new national consciousness. It had prepared “the voice of the people” of the revolution from 1848. On 15th of March, 1848 the protesting public gathered in the national theatre and demanded on the one hand, the performance of Katona’s *Bánk bán* and on the other hand, the chorus from Erkel’s *Hunyadi László*, “The schemer died”, which became one of the most popular revolutionary songs during 1848-1849.

6. The Voice of the People

One of the lessons taught by the French revolution was that the crowd, “the people” can influence political and social issues. And even if the people do not agree on everything – as we have seen in *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk bán* – still, they are able to exchange ideas, and they can be literally and symbolically in the same space: in the national public sphere. However, this public sphere is far from being a monolithic entity. The people can have their say by a bottom-up movement in political issues, which earlier were decided by a top-down act of a king, a military leader or a high official.

The village market becomes just as important place of representation of political ideas as the palace or the church. The institutions that before the nineteenth century were more or less isolated begin to open up for the public. These changes could take place because of an active transfer between the different social classes. As the bourgeois intelligentsia gained interest in the culture of the “folk”, the “folk” was also influenced by the aristocratic and middle class culture. However, one should not overestimate either the earlier – cultural and social – isolation, or the nineteenth-century “open society”. There had always been some kind of cultural exchange between the different social classes, but the frequency, the mode and the impact of transfer was unprecedented in the nineteenth century. The most important sites of transfer were cultural institutions. The institutionalised singing – whether it is opera or Liedertafeln – had a leading role in creating and maintaining sites of transfer between two cultures or between culture and politics. Songs could spread ideas more effectively than pamphlets or political orations and they could give a common voice to the people.

However, we should not forget that the cult of the bandleader, the *maestro*, also began in the nineteenth century. Napoleon and the mob of the French Revolution were the products of the same age, the rise of the chorus and that of the individual genius performer were parallel phenomena, too. Their ideal co-existence was temporary and towards the end of the century the individual genius was seeking seclusion from the crowd, while the crowd began to act as an alienated individual.